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ABSTRACT

The first part of this paper discusses the general decline in reading and writing ability in the United States and suggests several methods for improving literacy education, including teaching students the reading process several times a year from kindergarten through grade twelve. The second part of the paper makes two positive assumptions: that we are entering a new era with great growth potential for expanded literacy; and that since much information retrieval will still be from books, reading and writing will remain as active components in communication for some years. Several suggestions are offered for teachers of college composition courses: study some of the new books on diagnosing reading difficulties, on phonetics and phonetic systems, and on developmental reading programs which could serve as bases for courses in reading; build better relationships with schools of education; expand the freshman program; and work to increase students' motivation. Finally, this paper describes a three-course sequence for increasing literacy which was developed at William Paterson College in New Jersey. (TS)

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"Yes, Virginia, They Can Learn To Read"

Virgie E. Granger

It is nationally embarrassing and socially stigmatizing for the richest and most technologically advanced nation on earth to be experiencing such a rapid erosion of literacy. It is also appropriate to label this condition "epidemic" since over half the population is suffering from it. As in the case of other social diseases, however, many try to pretend it doesn't exist but, if it really does, then it has to be some inherent defect in a particular class or group. What an elitist, racist attitude that is!

So now as we approach our 200th birthday as a nation, we discover that an overwhelming majority of our population is being denied a fundamental right--the right to read and therefore the right to know. As with alcoholism, this decline in reading and writing ability permeates all social groups and levels, but it is particularly devastating to the groups already fighting poverty and other forms of discrimination.

Just a few comments to support these indictments: Last April the National Center for Health Statistics (HEW) made public the results of their four-year testing program which indicated that one million U.S. teenagers (12-17) couldn't read even at the 4th Grade level. Alarming as this was, they went on to report that these figures were probably "underestimates of the problem." Children from disadvantaged backgrounds scored lower--of course! One thing we should all know by now is that it is a very real disadvantage to be disadvantaged. That study is now five years old and nothing has happened to reverse the negative momentum. In fact, a recent report by the National Advisory Council states that

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54 million Americans (one-fourth of the population) never finished high school and a good portion of this group can neither read nor write. They also report that having a high school diploma no longer means that a person is literate--a fact that might surprise many people but not college freshman English teachers. S.A.T. scores have been dropping each year for the last ten years and now the alarm is being sounded by colleges in desperation--ALL colleges that is--those with open enrollment, those with selective enrollment, and those with highly restricted enrollment. City College of New York English Department Chairman, Edward Quinn, states in a Phi Delta Kappan article (November, 1974) that 75% of their students need remedial assistance; a recent news release from the University of California at Berkeley notes that 50% of their incoming freshmen need remedial reading and writing courses. That students themselves are only too aware of their deficiency is evidenced by a U.S. Office of Education study of "The High School Class of '72: A Capsule Description of High School Seniors." Ninety percent of the students interviewed stated that the elementary and secondary schools "should have provided more help for students having trouble with reading and math." (Phi Delta Kappan, January, 1975) States are carrying on extensive testing and so are individual school districts--all with similar results: scores are down, a smaller percentage of students is maintaining an effective reading level, and functional illiteracy is indeed at epidemic proportions. On January 19 of this year, the New York Times ran an article on Livingston College (a branch of Rutgers University). It seems their students heard the rumor that a literacy test was being considered as a condition for graduation

from college. A large group of students descended on the administration in an effort to force them to retract any such plan. This does not need any further explanation--just time for you to consider it plus a postscript to the effect that some graduate schools are now considering remedial reading and writing courses. Simply put, our partners in Freshman English--Reading and Writing--are not enjoying very good health at the moment.

Why did our country fail to keep up in the race for literacy? The fact that many countries have achieved close to 100% proves it is not an impossible goal. I suggest that there are three areas in addition to the home environment that could provide at least some partial answers:

1. The elementary and secondary schools (including the teachers);
2. The governmental and industrial agencies that created the Technological Mystique; and
3. The anti-intellectual movement of the 1960's which was encouraged in many instances by college and university professors.

I must preface this part of the discussion by saying something that I feel most educators now agree on: that a child's first years are the most important as a basis for all learning; that his readiness to read is affected by the educational level of the parents, their attitude toward reading, and the number of positive experiences they can provide. These differences in background are a reality that we will always have to cope with.

Methods of reading come and go but at the present time an eclectic approach seems to have won out. This is fortunate because the chaos that developed

with the advent of sight vocabulary to the exclusion of phonics is part of the problem. It's why one of my students recently read: "It was indeed a brassiere incident." And, when I suggested "bizarre" someone said: "Oh, yes, the place they sell cakes and pies!" The method isn't the entire problem either; it is partly the readiness of the child to receive the instruction and the fact that if he misses out the first time around, he may not get the second chance. Would it not be responsible educational practice to teach the complete reading process--including the sound system, the phonics--at least once (and maybe even twice) a year all the way from kindergarten through grade twelve if there were students who needed it? Disabled readers can be identified by the second grade but all that really seems to happen after that is sorting. I've come to believe that many teachers don't do much more than sort, label, and pass along the students. I'm afraid we are sometimes guilty of doing the same thing in freshman English. It is interesting to note that delinquent behavior is identifiable at about the same time reading problems occur and more often than not involves the same students. So, instead of ever solving these basic skills problems, the students are forced to build defense mechanisms in an effort to hide the stigma. By the time they enter college, their face-saving techniques are so well developed that they are forced into all forms of dishonest behavior in order to keep on beating the system. The schools, on the other hand, brag about their concern for the whole child, the affective domain. Of course, feelings, emotions, and attitudes are important but so is the other domain: learning the skills necessary for survival in a highly technical society. There is no sensible reason

why reading could not be taught as a legitimate subject through 12th grade and on into college. We could dream up some new euphemisms if need be. How about "Linguistics For Survival" or "Communications in the 21st Century"? Writing skills have historically been neglected in our schools, and it's time interested citizens demanded a change. At least the art of writing could be encouraged rather than discouraged as it often is when it is used as a punishment for all sorts of behavior problems. Notewriting in the elementary schools could be looked on with favor rather than as a sin; French schools not only encourage this activity but their teachers build the whole writing program around it. Teachers make a difference too. At about the same time we were confused over reading methods, we were also giving out emergency teaching certificates to people with less than a B.A. education. It's hard to imagine the teacher shortage but nevertheless there was one and some of the people brought in to teach at that time are still there, never having finished the degree or upgraded their skills. We have also not faced the problem that high school English teachers would do well to be trained as reading specialists. Nowadays when teaching jobs are hard to find, the English major with the reading specialty might find employment much sooner. The diagnoses all seem to indicate that we are not using what we already know about learning and teaching basic skills, about motivation, and about child development itself.

Do you recall a decade or so ago when the harbingers of the technological revolution tried to make us all feel obsolete, when McLuhan was turning on and off the hot and cold spigots and we were told that reading and books were anachronisms in the new audio-video age? And, only a couple of years ago

we were running scared over the survival of freshman English. It's fortunate that many of us stayed around to see what happened, that we didn't all take off for the South Sea Islands. Of course, hardware and software are cheaper and more compliant than teachers which is what made them so attractive to school boards and college trustees. If technology could send a man to the moon while we watched, could simulate a human brain, could put a real live war in every living room, it's not surprising that the movement created a mystique. Surely there was no problem that couldn't be solved just by plugging in. But, maybe it's no accident that our first class of Mousketeers were the ones who began the anti-intellectual, anti-everything movement of the '60's.

At a conference at Montclair State College in Upper Montclair, New Jersey, just two days before he took over as President of San Francisco State College, Dr. S.I. Hayakawa talked about his fears for the children who were already watching 22,000 hours of television before they were 18. As children sit passively in front of the TV, they are not involved in any way; they are not contributing to the experience, but rather they are totally mesmerized by the medium. He felt that many young white viewers rejected the Madison Avenue materialism they saw whereas many young Black viewers rioted to get what they saw and felt they had a right to--the Great American Dream. What a powerful educator television really is might not be known for some time, but we do know that watching has replaced reading in many homes.

Sesame Street would provide reading readiness and would teach reading to all children--especially to the inner city children who were getting further behind. A few years later, the Electric Company would teach reading and

mathematics to school-age children. The results of the first serious studies are in and, in the area of skills development, technology is a big loser. Sesame Street did prove to be educational in many aspects; it was proved especially successful in changing attitudes toward school. At first there appeared to be gains in reading readiness but later on when tests were run to evaluate the Electric Company it became obvious that initial gains disappeared rather quickly and that students who hadn't watched consistently fared just as well as those who had. Television was intended to be an extension of the eyes--not of the brain--and could not, therefore, be too effective in teaching developmental or conceptual skills.

A recent study from the Institute of Public Employment of Cornell University states that in many cases "educational technology has a negative effect. Abandoning programmed learning and open and closed circuit TV could lead to achievement gains of from 1.6% to 8% in reading and/or math."

About a year ago I was asked by the college to look over a new computer-TV system that we were considering tying into. It was supposed to include a new, exciting English component. What it turned out to be was a very boring review of troublesome verbs beginning with "lie" and "lay"; I couldn't believe it! Let's hope the new talking computers have more creative programmers!

I suppose we could rely on good old American business ingenuity to solve our problems. According to a recent column in the Wall Street Journal publishers are beginning to simplify college texts to accommodate the college student who can't read. But, like the bidialectal readers that started coming off the presses not too long ago, these simplified texts will only make the problem harder to solve.

Of course we shouldn't close our eyes or minds to technology; it can be very useful in the total educational picture. But to ask of it what it can't deliver is worse than creating a mystique; it is the perpetration of a fraud on all who are taken in.

The Youth Rebellion of the 1960's came along at the heighth of the Technology Revolution--partly as a result of it and partly as a reaction to it. But don't forget, those young people were the first to see the bankrupt morality, the greed and lust for power that had infected the very top of our government; they saw that the civil and human rights supposedly granted to all Americans existed only on paper; they saw the mistake of going into Viet Nam; they saw Big Business pollute and rape the country with the blessings of the President; they saw the CIA for what it really was; and they saw all of us idolizing materialism. While we were cluttering up our lives with bigger and more powerful gadgets, they were simplifying their lives and reordering their priorities. But, as so often happens in wide swings of this kind, they also eliminated much that was good and necessary. Actually, the residual effects of their anti-intellectualism, their anti-rational behavior contributed much to this loss of and lack of concern for literacy that we are now experiencing. Their lack of any historical sense, their devotion to a particular brand of existentionalism which fostered action with no reflection, their willingness to so readily accept oral language as the only valid communication, and their unwillingness to accept any discipline made their ability to contribute anything to society difficult and, in some cases, impossible. Their abandonment of all objectivity in favor of total

subjectivity probably fostered the paranoia that is still evidenced whenever any type of evaluation is suggested. Many well-meaning college professors were caught up in this shafting of discipline and disciplines, when standards for everything including reading and writing were labeled undemocratic, racist, and--to use the cliché of the '60's--irrelevant. However, there does seem to be a turn-about taking place right now, not only with this age group who are now approaching thirty but also with the new generation --those already in college and those about to enter. If we need a sign, an omen, perhaps it could be the fact that barber shops are experiencing a dramatic upswing in business and enrollments in barber colleges are rising.

So, at this point, let's make two positive assumptions:

1. that we are entering a new era with great growth potential for expanded literacy;

and

2. that much information retrieval (and sheer enjoyment) will still be from books, and reading and writing will still remain as active components in communication for some years.

With this in mind, what could be the new role of the college composition teacher? First, we could make a conscious effort to accent our talents as reading specialists. After all, reading has always been one of the special areas of linguistics and most of us are already specialized in the general area of language. Actually, we are and always have been reading teachers. To strengthen this expertise we could study some of the new books on diagnosing reading difficulties, on phonetic and phonemic systems, and on developmental reading programs which could serve as bases for college courses in reading. We might also try to build

better relationships with our Schools of Education because, after all, they are at one end of the continuum and we are at the other. Then, if and when we develop this role of language specialist, why couldn't we become the untapped resources not only for our college community but for the community-at-large including the elementary schools, the secondary schools, and the adult education centers which, by the way, are increasing in number and are getting immense federal funding. We have a built-in prestige factor going for us and I suspect our services would be in great demand as consultants, for in-service classes, workshops, seminars, speeches, round tables, etc.

Second, the climate is right for expanding, rather than cutting down or cutting out, the freshman English program--especially if this expansion includes reading. If any of your colleagues are reluctant about teaching reading per se you might recommend the popular paperback, Reading, How To by Herbert Kohl.

Motivation is the key factor in learning to read and I see plenty of evidence that this is increasing. In Deschooling Society, Ivan Illich makes the comment that when motivation is high an adult can learn to read in forty hours. That equals one semester with some time to spare. If we take advantage of this new interest in reading, we might very well become the catalysts in successful program development, especially if we aren't sidetracked by such issues as dialect differences. No matter which country or language you have in mind, there are wide varieties in dialect and there is also a standard book language shared by all. No question that everyone should have a right to his own language and it should be respected.

But, by the same token, everyone should have the right to his literary heritage and to the language of power, politics, and economics. Anything less than this is racist and fraudulent.

The program we have developed at William Paterson College is a three-course sequence--nine credit hours total. Since the first two courses are pre-freshman English, they can be considered only as six hours of free electives, the credit is nontransferable, and they are graded Pass or No Credit. Regular freshman English is graded A, B, C, or N--the assumption being that a D is not acceptable as college-level writing. The first of these courses, "Approaches To Reading and Writing," is primarily a reading course where we work with sounds, syllables, roots and affixes, vocabulary, and all facets of comprehension. We do work on speed reading but that's more of a euphemism than anything else; we do this because we find the students are more willing to admit they can't read fast than that they can't comprehend. In the second course, "Patterns For Prose," we continue the instruction in reading but the emphasis shifts to writing: sentence structure and paragraph development. Paraphrasing, summarizing, and brief individual responses are utilized to bridge the reading and writing skills. Then the regular freshman English course, "Writing Effective Prose," deals with the whole paper, and the hope is that by now the students' prose can possibly become more effective. At present, the two remedial courses are voluntary under an advisement system. We are about to try using a needs assessment test which would be given to all incoming freshmen as the key to this advisement. We had intended to use the new English portion of the S.A.T. but we tend to agree with the experts who have evaluated it and found it biased. So, we are now in the process of selecting a test for this purpose.

Although we are only in the second semester of the program, it appears to be gaining support. Giving shots and pills to cure these ailments would be the simple solution, but I'm afraid the right ones haven't come along yet. By the way, not only are the freshmen choosing these courses, so are older students who have already passed freshman English; this is something we hadn't anticipated.

If we really wanted to expand our English support program, we could add a course to every major in the college: "Reading and Writing in the Social Sciences," "Communication Skills for Pre-Med and Nursing Majors," etc. In some special fields the vocabulary alone is difficult enough to warrant extra instruction. So, why not "Reading in Psychology"? We added the obvious of such courses for the Business Administration majors and it was oversubscribed the first couple of hours of registration.

Most colleges and universities now have study skills centers for students needing extra help; mostly they are walk-in tutoring centers and they are usually staffed by older students. I presume some of these do produce results but, from what I have observed and heard about, many of the centers function best in easing the consciences of administrators who need visible evidence that they are extending help. For those students who do drop in, there is often more hustling and rapping going on than learning. This shouldn't be too surprising, however, since many of the student teachers lack these skills themselves and often don't know how to help. I would like to suggest a new concept and, as part of this concept, the potential use of one of our greatest untapped resources. Instead of the remedial approach, why not approach from the positive--a community of scholars, a study and discussion center. There are thousands of newly retired medical doctors,

clergy, lawyers, actors, businessmen and women, nurses, teachers, etc. who have time and energy to spare with no place to expend it. There may also be younger, well-educated people who do not need to work and who would enjoy this intellectual challenge. Some of the groups could be utilitarian dealing with specific professions; others could be for enjoyment and intellectual growth--the fine arts, the humanities, etc. In addition to the tutoring sessions and discussion groups, I can think of several valuable spin-off effects such as closing that so-called "generation gap," career counselling, developing new and varied friendships, respecting diverse ideas. This whole concept has been in my mind for some time and we have a couple of volunteers such as I have just described helping us right now, but not until I read a news item a few months ago did it really take shape. Quickly paraphrased, it stated that Dr. Leland Jacobs, a retired Columbia professor, author of over thirty children's books, and originator of the one-to-one reading program is meeting regularly with small groups of students in a New Jersey public high school in an effort to encourage reading. He reads his own poetry, listens to their original works, evaluates their writing. It would seem that this might work even better at the college level.

Especially for the teaching of basic skills, the one-to-one, or a few-to-one, is still the ideal learning situation. Reading for meaning requires human interaction (impossible to get from any kind of hardware or software) and the smaller the group, the more interaction, feedback, and potential for conceptual development.

Producing a literate American society may be a costly process; it will no doubt take both money and ingenuity. But it is difficult to understand how anyone can believe that this country can maintain or improve a satisfactory life style for more and more of its population in an increasingly complex world without a more highly literate populus.

Yes, Virginia, they can learn to read, and I assert that we have a vital role to help provide the ways and means, the diagnosis and the treatment.

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